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HRD Forum — Viewpoint

Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management challenges and opportunities for HRD

Opinion: Can Working Abroad Ever be Worthwhile?

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Introduction

Despite assumptions of automatic benefits, sending people abroad can sometimes be bad for business, while working abroad can be as much of a pain, as a perk or privilege.

Over the last 3 years, we have managed and participated in a major international staff exchange programme supporting research and innovation, funded by the European Commission. A consortium of 16 partner organizations of varying size, in different industries and across five countries in Europe and Asia undertook to complete 270 months of international secondment between them.

The results have been overwhelmingly positive and successful: new and fruitful relationships between individuals and institutions, a diverse network growing in size and stability, increasing confidence, creativity and innovation within the project, a rapidly developing international profile and significant new skills sets, international experience and effectiveness for all involved. We have navigated stormy geopolitical waters involving Brexit and US-intra-Korean relations. The development of such capacity is a key aim of our project.

However, we have arguably learned more from our failures than our success. In this opinion piece we want to take the rare opportunity reflect on the mistakes we have made and how we rectified them, recovered and thrived. By the end of our staff exchange project, we believe we will have perfected the creation of value from international mobility and everyone can learn from our experience and the solutions we have developed.

Internationalization Through Staff Mobility

Many businesses are engaged in internationalization strategies which rely on staff mobility. Many policy makers insist on the need for companies to internationalize in order to function in a globalized world. The need for intercultural understanding and international knowledge has become an urgent priority, while international literacy has become critical to cultural, technological, economic and political health. In the current political atmosphere in Europe, the USA and beyond, it is more important than ever to build understanding between both people and organizations. When governments pursue isolationist, nationalistic policies then companies must be self-reliant in developing their business abroad and co-operating with international partners. Despite all technological development so far, there is still no substitute for face-to-face communication, spending time together and experiencing another country ‘on the ground’. Even so-called ‘born-global firms’ will find this more challenging if freedom of movement decreases.

There is widespread evidence in a substantial field of academic research and the constant flow of published advice that business trips abroad, foreign assignments or periods of expatriation often fail to create value. Worse still, such activities can even destroy value for business and individuals. Potential international partners can be alienated. People who travel report scepticism and even hostility from colleagues at home. However you define them, encounters with “foreigners” can be disastrous for both parties and their employers.

What do we mean by value? It depends on the aim of the international work for the people involved and their employers. It can be short or long-term, quantitative or qualitative, more or less commercial. Value is therefore somewhat subjective and accumulated on multiple levels. We use the broadest possible definition: participants must deliberately discover or create it, then construct and interpret it through active engagement, individually or collectively. Value can emerge in participants’ ordinary or extraordinary, expected or unexpected activities during international mobility. Working out how to create and interpret these value creating activities is vital.

So how do we ensure the creation of value by those mobilized staff? What is the right balance between individual and organizational effort and attitude? In this reflection we challenge the simplistic assumption that all mobility is automatically a force for good and suggest some realistic ways to ensure value-creation through pro-active management of sound processes and policies. Our experience is specific to the aims and constraints of our project, but the learnings are universal.

How to Find the Right People to Go to the Right Places

For the Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management project, we have used two different approaches to identify candidates to send abroad: first, selecting people who had the right qualities, experience, attitude, knowledge, and skills. We chose people whom we and our colleagues trusted and judged to be dependable. Second, volunteers self-selected, arguing that they were suitable. We used Vygotsky’s concept of ‘zones of proximal development’ in order to judge how individuals would cope or benefit. We sent our most experienced people first, and to the most culturally distant destinations. We accepted offers from those who considered themselves particularly experienced. Both of these approaches have proved to be fallible. On

occasion, incorrect assessments have been made by both recruiters and volunteers, resulting at times in inappropriate behaviour, emergency interventions, less productive secondments, premature returns, and strained organizational relations.

Early on, we made a significant strategic change. At first, we aimed to maximize value by expatriating as many different individuals as possible. After several challenges and even failures, in which value was actually destroyed, we aimed to maximize value by repeatedly expatriating a smaller number of individuals, often to multiple destinations. This has proved to be much more successful: past performance is a clear indicator of future value.

We deliberately made the secondment opportunities financially constrained in order to avoid attracting volunteers motivated for the wrong reasons e.g. to “fill their boots”. We believe this has worked in places, with participants keener to create alternative value for themselves. However, we have found that more senior staff are less likely to travel under these circumstances. Attitudinal differences to the use of public funding and accountability have meant this has not been consistently successful. Varying purchasing power, cost of living, travel cost variables and salary levels between countries have made a consistent approach impossible.

Uncertainty has made the establishment of a pipeline of secondees challenging. Plans are constantly fluid, with individuals changing jobs, starting a family, or suddenly having other obligations or priorities. Then they sometimes just get cold feet. The humanity involved in international work has been at the fore. Geopolitical events such as Brexit and changes in North Korean-US foreign policy have affected attitudes and confidence in a project involving the UK, Ireland and South Korea.

We have worked with two types of people in fulfilling these secondments: passive dependants and active independents. All wanted access to organizational resources (e.g. information, accommodation, facilities, funds). However, some of them over-emphasized these tangible resources and ignored intangibilities. Some felt emotionally isolated and perceived a lack of support from the sending and hosting organizations. In contrast, others believed that their value was created actively by them as an individual and that learning how to access resources — tangible and intangible — was part of the challenge.

Many companies consider family accompanying expatriates a problem. In contrast, we suggest that the family contributes to a positive experience by providing social and emotional support and thereby making an assignment less risky. The value of the family seems to be closely connected with cultural difference: the greater the distance between the home and host cultures, the more important the role of family as support mechanism. We have heard family responsibilities described as ‘speed-bumps’ — i.e. hindrances to professional development and performance. This encourages people to keep them hidden, adding to the stress of being away from home. There are few people so isolated that they have no-one to care about. In other words, this affects everyone. We suggest that these concerns are made explicit and family embraced as a potential point of communality with other human beings. In our experience, discussing and dealing with issues outside of work has deepened, broadened and strengthened relationships while simultaneously encouraging others to take part. This in turn diversifies the mobilized group beyond the ‘usual suspects’ for international work. Expertise is developed and shared between secondees.

How to Ensure that Things get Done and People End Up Wiser

From a standing start, we have rapidly realized the value in good processes around the communication and organization on both sides of any international secondment and have rushed to set them up. Pre-departure explicit discussion of aims, activities and responsibilities mitigate the risks inherent in implicit assumptions about different cultures. We then use social media and other on-line channels to update, report and record events and actions. This facilitates ongoing monitoring, spots issues arising, aids swift and often informal resolution. The interactivity of social media encourages ‘approval’ from colleagues, builds team spirit, shares experience, and demonstrates visibility.

Nevertheless, issues have included unclear roles and differing organizational cultures and politics. Secondees have vastly different motivations for participating, so flexibility is key. Universally, a secondment abroad is considered an optional extra by an employer and so work accumulates beforehand and afterwards, with most participants having to maintain responsibilities at home while working abroad. Even experienced travellers have realized that actually trying to achieve things in a foreign country or unfamiliar organization is impossible in a short time — it’s not like being on holiday or even at an international event. Pressure of time makes cultural assumptions more likely and dangerous. Even predictable issues such as jet lag, time zones, language barriers, climate, and lifestyle differences have taken some by surprise when they try to progress their work rather than relaxing.

These issues often apply to the hosts too. Underestimating the work involved in hosting a series of incoming employees is common. The ultimate irony is that the most convenient times to travel are exactly the times no-one is available to host.

Most important is deliberate and structured review of lessons learned. We have done this both formally and informally. Along with face-to-face conversations at hosts and on return, secondees complete a learner record and write reports about their achievements and challenges. Seminars and focus groups have been held as well as larger groups reviewing arrangements and suggesting developments. It is important to realize that some more profound lessons take time to learn — it is only months after return that secondees start to realize and appreciate what they have really learned, often about themselves.

Expatriate assignments’ success or failure is normally attributed to the organization while the role of the person involved can be underplayed. Independent overseas experience might outstrip formal expatriation as a source of human resource development for organizations. Expertise might better be developed by individuals acting independently than through some corporate policy, which robs the initiative of some of its learning opportunities. There is a considerable difference between a company-led expatriation and an autonomous working abroad experience. The level of responsibility felt by the organization is completely different.

Conclusion

The assumption that all international experience is positive is an overly simplistic assertion. Indeed, the nature and extent of value creation through international mobility is very largely down to the individual and particular context of the experience. This makes it less controllable

by organizations and more reliant upon the selection of individuals, with previous performance clearly indicative of the future.

Managers can rely neither on institutional policy and process nor entirely on the individual. Rather, a combination of the two should be developed for maximum value creation. Value is more likely to be created and ensured by repeated exposure to international experience and so this should be reflected in the strategy. However, an individual's ability to assess their own capacity or efficacy for international work is limited, and sometimes based on erroneous measures such as holidays abroad or international events. Great care should be taken to assess this more objectively and assignments planned accordingly.

A key idea is to avoid motivating participation in mobility using the wrong levers, such as financial gain, which will not drive value creation for your organization. Meanwhile, keep an open mind regarding what value can be created and how. It can come from unexpected sources and take time. Recruit and select 'active independents' and embrace rather than reject or ignore their family circumstances — everyone has significant others and family members can provide support and motivation.

Establish robust processes and policies around pre-departure preparation and ongoing communication. Yet maintain flexibility towards individuals and their motivations. Ensure you understand them. Structured debrief and post-return review are priceless in building organizational knowledge and individual expertise. Ideally, review immediately and after a few months to capture superficial and deeper learnings.

Working abroad can often be worthwhile and, properly managed with a reliance on the individual, it can create great value for your business.

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